The Arctic: Gender issues

ALTHOUGH MANY SOCIAL ISSUES RELATED TO gender that affect communities in Canada's Arctic are shared by Canadian society more generally, some are unique to the region and its indigenous populations, notably the Inuit. Over the years, Arctic communities have experienced a number of developments that have affected women and men differently; these include the rapid social change brought about by colonization, welfare state policies, economic policies, and urbanization. More recently, gender issues in northern populations have been shaped by factors such as climate change and environmental pollution, which have become pressing concerns for the people of the Arctic region.

This paper explores some of these issues, with particular emphasis on Inuit communities. It begins with a demographic snapshot of current inequities that exist between Inuit communities and the general Canadian population. It then discusses how gender and gender roles are understood in Inuit culture and addresses gender issues in relation to factors such as the environment, economic conditions, domestic violence, health and well-being, housing and homelessness, and politics. Recommendations that have been proposed for addressing these issues will be discussed as part of the concluding remarks.

Demographic overview

Canada is home to about 50,000[1] Inuit living in 53 Arctic communities in four geographic regions known collectively as Inuit Nunaat: Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (Quebec), Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories. Inuit women and their children make up almost 70% of the entire Inuit population;[2] 39% of the population is under the age of 15, as compared with 19% of the Canadian population overall.[3]

Socio-economic and health indicators reveal important disparities between Inuit society and the general population, as well as differences in the circumstances of Inuit women and Inuit men. Life expectancy among the Inuit is lower, for both men and women, than that among the general Canadian population. In 2001, life expectancy for the Inuit – 67 years – was roughly equivalent to the life expectancy for the general Canadian population in 1946.[4] In 2001, the life expectancy for Inuit women was about 70 years, as compared with 82 years for Canadian women overall; for Inuit men, life expectancy was about 64 years, as compared with 77 years for Canadian men overall.[5] Health statistics point to higher infant mortality rates and poorer health conditions than in the general population. Women in the North are much more vulnerable to becoming homeless than their counterparts in southern Canada. Suicide rates among Inuit are 11 times higher than the Canadian average.[6] Moreover, one study shows that Inuit men aged 15 to 24 years are five times more likely to commit suicide than women of the same age.[7]

Statistics indicate that Inuit women fare better than Inuit men with respect to education and employment. Although secondary education graduation rates for both sexes are lower than the Canadian average, in 1999–2000 in Nunavut these rates were higher for women (43%) than for men (27%).[8] Women form the majority of the workforce in Nunavut, mainly in jobs with the Government of Nunavut, the largest employer in the territory. In certain communities, Inuit women earned more than other Canadian women. For example, 2001 census data show that Nunavummiut women earned an average of $974 more per year than other Canadian women. In contrast, in 2001, Nunavummiut men earned $7,099 less per year than other Canadian men.[9] Unemployment rates are higher for the Inuit population than for the Canadian population as a whole. For example, as of 2001, 22% of Inuit men and 17% of Inuit women were unemployed, as compared with 7% and 6% of non-Inuit men and women, respectively.[10] However, this large gap in employment rates between the Inuit and non-Inuit populations has been closing more quickly for Inuit women than for Inuit men.[11]

This demographic overview provides a glimpse into the disparities between women and men in Inuit society. In certain cases, the welfare of Arctic men is

"much more jeopardized and at risk than that of women."[12] Yet, despite the fact that women appear to be faring better than men economically, socially and psychologically, they continue to be under-represented in political institutions and in decision-making roles.[13]

Gender in Inuit society

Any discussion of gender issues that arise in Inuit communities needs to be mindful of the gender model in Inuit society, where gender is "situational and contextual"[14] rather than the "fixed binary"[15] more typical of Western societies. Even though traditional Inuit gender roles define various activities for men and women, these roles are pliable.[16] Some scholars have remarked that this fundamental flexibility may be adaptive, given the harsh and variable ecological conditions in the Arctic. For example, if a family has no male children, the father will impart hunting skills to one of his daughters.[17] In Inuit society, the construction of the person and his or her identity allows individuals to move between gender categories. Children are socialized according to the gender of the person who last held their ancestral name, and not according to their biological sexual characteristics. When children reach puberty, they usually revert to roles based on their biological sex.[18] Policies and programs that address gender issues arising from recent developments in the Arctic need to consider the Inuit gender model in their analysis and approach.

Gender issues

Recent developments in the Arctic have contributed to the erosion of traditional male activities. When Inuit communities were forced to move into permanent settlements, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, it became difficult for men to pursue traditionally male-oriented activities such as hunting. In contrast, women were able to maintain their traditional activities of caring for children and the household. Women were also able to adapt more readily to a rapidly changing society and to benefit from these changes, as demonstrated by their higher employment rates.

These developments have led to certain imbalances in the status of Inuit men and women that have affected the relations between them. It is within this context that certain gender-related issues, notably domestic violence, can be understood. At the same time, the unequal status of Aboriginal women more generally in Canadian society must be considered as a contributing factor to the gender issues that arise specifically in Inuit communities.

The environment. The Inuit consider themselves to be intrinsic to the Arctic ecosystem. Because of their close affinity with their habitat, Inuit hunters and elders have been reporting climate-related changes in the Arctic for the past 20 years. Both climate change and environmental contamination[19] threaten the health, livelihood and food security of the Inuit, who depend on the land and the waters for sustenance. According to Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, "climate change has become the ultimate threat to Inuit culture."[20]

Some observers and Inuit environmental activists have pointed out that environmental degradation affects women and men differently. For example, women have a particular connection to environmental issues in their traditional familial and domestic roles. They are concerned about the contaminants that they transfer to their infants across the placental barrier and through breast-feeding.[21] In preparing food for the household, they are also made aware of environmental contaminants, the effects of which are often apparent in fish and game. By intercepting contaminated food, Inuit women play a critical role in safeguarding the health of their families and communities.[22]

This close connection with the effects of environmental contamination has become apparent in the active involvement of Inuit women in environmental issues. Inuit women leaders have brought to the forefront the health risks that their communities face because of pollutants. Inuit women play a significant role in their communities in this regard, particularly as advisors and in influencing policy and decision-making. As one researcher has pointed out, "the degree to which women are able to assume these roles and positions varies both geographically and culturally and according to the specific resource-based sector."[23] She recommends that further research be conducted to better understand Inuit women's contributions to the management of natural resources and their involvement in emerging environmental issues.[24] In addition, their participation in formal institutional structures that address such issues needs to be considered.

The economy. The formal economy in the Canadian Arctic is based largely on industrial-scale resource extraction.[25] Statistics indicate that the mining sector employs mostly men (89%), with Aboriginal people accounting for 5.2% of the total mining labour force.[26] In 2006, Inuit represented only 9% of the Aboriginal workforce in the mining sector.[27] Of the wealth created from natural resource exploitation, only a fraction remains in the Arctic region.[28] Jacqueline McGlade, Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, has remarked that "industrial activities and infrastructure developments in the region and their associated impacts on the distribution, health and availability of wildlife resources ... could potentially destabilize the sustainable utilization [of the Arctic ecosystem] by indigenous peoples."[29]

Traditional hunting, fishing, breeding, and gathering activities make an important contribution to local food production and consumption. For example, Inuit harvesters in Nunavut contribute roughly $40 million of country food annually.[30] The term "traditional" reflects the linkages between the past and present lives of Inuit people as well as their connections to one another as members of a community.[31] As noted earlier, hunting is undertaken largely by Inuit men. Approximately 80% of Inuit men in the Canadian Arctic were involved in harvesting activities during 2000.[32] However, increasingly, this type of activity is not seen by young Inuit harvesters as sufficient for a gainful livelihood. A study by Statistics Canada suggests that high costs of equipment and supplies required to harvest fish and game may be contributing to lower levels of participation by young Inuit.[33] Other research suggests that Inuit youth in particular have internalized the idea that hunting is a "leisure activity" and do not view fathers who "only hunted" as being "employed."[34]

Women also contribute to these traditional economic activities. During 2000, 63% of Inuit women harvested fish and game.[35] According to Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, "[t]raditionally, women were responsible for decisions regarding children, food preparation, and the running of the household."[36] In the past, they were responsible for "deciding what type of skin a man should bring home, what food should be brought home, and even where to erect the summer tent."[37] It is worth noting that these activities required "cooperation, sharing, and complementary skills" in order to survive "one of the most challenging environments of the world."[38]

In devising solutions to the gender issues that arise in conjunction with economic development in the Arctic, it is important to consider the relationships that exist between economic growth and human development.[39] Women and men in the Arctic do not necessarily benefit from such economic growth and are affected unequally by such development. In addition, the traditional economy and women's and men's participation in this economy have to be accounted for in the development of both short-term and long-term sustainable economic policies for the Arctic.

Domestic violence. According to Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, the incidence of violence in Inuit communities is very high. In 2004, Nunavut's reported violent crime rate was eight times that of Canada overall. In the same year, RCMP detachments in Nunavut reported 498 domestic assaults against women and 58 against men. In many communities, violent crime is increasing rather than decreasing, and women and children are most often the victims.[40] A recent Statistics Canada survey shows that the use of shelters for abused women and their children has grown dramatically in Nunavut. Between 2001 and 2004, shelter use went up by 54%, as compared to a 4.6% increase in the rest of the country.[41]

There are several interpretations of these trends. Some analysts view spousal abuse in Arctic communities as the result of cultural, ethnic and psychological factors. As one researcher explains, "violence against women is usually psychologized within this dominant discourse."[42] In other words, domestic violence is discussed in terms of a social problem that is unique to certain cultures. Others consider that these frameworks ignore the gender-related dimensions of violence against women.[43] This feminist analysis interprets acts of violence against women in Arctic communities as not much different from similar acts committed in other communities[44] where imbalances in the power relations between women and men contribute to higher rates of violence against women. A third interpretation focuses on the role of colonialism and paternalism in contributing to the oppression and inequality of Inuit people more broadly.[45] Inuit women's associations such as Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada ground their analysis in the lived experience of Inuit people:

> Abusers are often survivors of abuse themselves – abuse that occurred in the community, in the residential schools, or in their own families. Abuse creates a cycle of fear, shame, anger, addictions and violence that passes from one generation to the next, from man to woman and from adult to child.[46]

Studies show that several factors precipitate violent acts by men against women. As noted earlier, the forced resettlement of Inuit communities caused an imbalance in gender relations. Resettlement has deprived many men of their traditional roles as hunters, whereas women have been able to transfer most of their traditional roles to their new situation. Other factors that exacerbate the gender imbalance include economic stress and dependency, substance abuse, male jealousy prompted by the reversal of roles and loss of power, poor communication, and the intergenerational effects of violence against women, whereby the experience of one generation is perpetuated through abusive relationships in the next.[47]

In their work on domestic violence, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada identified two main causes of the high incidence of spousal abuse: uncontrollable changes to culture and tradition; and feelings of loss of control over the future.[48] They propose that the root causes of abuse be addressed and recommend various strategies for doing so, such as developing healing resources and training; providing aftercare and long-term emotional support for victims of abuse; and integrating Inuit language and culture and applying elder and Inuit values in the delivery of services to the community.[49]

Health and well-being. As noted earlier, there are greater disparities in health status between men and women in Inuit communities than in the general population. These disparities are manifested by indicators such as lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality rates. There are serious health issues that affect Inuit women, such as high rates of sexually transmitted infections, high levels of smoking, and substance abuse. In addition, wellness, suicide prevention and coping with stress are important issues for both Inuit men and women. Food security and accessibility is of particular significance for Inuit women, who often have sole responsibility for the children.[50]

The health and well-being of Inuit families must be addressed through policies and programs that respond to the complexity of issues that affect Inuit women. In addition, these policies need to focus on the areas of maternal and child health, midwifery and childbirth, child care, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), teen pregnancies, early childhood development, and child sexual abuse.[51] Currently, the federal government provides funding for the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program for First Nations and Inuit people. The program provides healthy food and nutritional supplements, health information and counselling, and breastfeeding education.[52]

Many health problems can be alleviated by improving the infrastructure in Inuit communities. Such improvements need to encompass the availability of health information and human resources, leading-edge telehealth capacity (including the willingness of physicians and other front-line providers to use the technology), and state-of-the-art northern-based equipment and medical facilities.[53] An example of a successful telehealth initiative is that implemented by the Nunavut Department of Health and Social Services – the Ikajuruti Inungnik Ungasiktumi (IIU) Telehealth Network. This network allows patients to stay in their own communities while obtaining a diagnosis or even treatment via teleconferencing or videoconferencing. It also allows patients to stay connected with their families should they need to relocate for care.[54]

Housing and homelessness. Housing shortages are especially problematic in the Canadian Arctic. According to one study, "an additional 3,000 housing units would be necessary to place the living conditions of the Inuit on a par with Canadian norms."[55] Furthermore, the poor quality and overcrowding of housing have had a negative effect on the health and social well-being of Inuit people. Women and children are particularly at risk, since such living conditions lead to more violence and distress. As Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada has noted: "This is a multi-sectoral issue that is linked to community well-being and social development. Poverty begets poor housing, which, in turn, fosters circumstances that lead to homelessness and to poor health and violence in the home."[56]

Moreover, women in the Canadian Arctic are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. Certain characteristics of Canada's North contribute to this. These include lack of access to services for women and children caused by the remote geography; under-developed infrastructure, including a

housing shortage; a harsh climate that increases the cost of clothing for women and children; a small population base that contributes to women's isolation; and the high cost of living. According to a recent YWCA report on women's homelessness in the North, very few people are aware of the "full extent of the situation as it impacts women and children" or of the "despair and day-to-day suffering of these fellow Canadians."[57] The YWCA report includes among its 16 recommendations that a national housing policy be established that is inclusive of women and that the supply of decent, safe low-income housing be increased.

Gender and politics. In Canada, women's representation in political institutions is much lower than that of men. In the House of Commons, women currently constitute only 22% of the total number of parliamentarians. In the Northwest Territories and Yukon, women's representation since the 1970s has been at around 10%.

As of June 2008, there are three women serving in the Northwest Territories legislature (3/19), two in the Yukon legislature (2/18) and two in the Nunavut legislature (2/19). In Nunavut, women have cabinet responsibilities within the legislature. In both the Northwest Territories and Yukon, women have held the post of premier. Women tend to participate more at the local level.[58]

An analysis of Inuit women's participation in political institutions needs to consider that women may be part of an "unelected" leadership that is not visible in formal institutional structures of governance.[59] In this respect, a woman's role in preserving and sustaining Inuit culture and traditions is significant. More specifically, women's organizations such as Pauktuutt Inuit Women of Canada are politically engaged at the international level. For example, Pauktuutt played a leadership role in the fight against the appropriation by the fashion designer Donna Karan of the *amauti*, an Inuit women's outer garment that allows the woman to carry an infant on her back.[60] Pauktuutt also has become internationally renowned in the realm of intellectual property rights and the protection of Inuit traditional knowledge.

Moving forward

> Inuit women play an integral role in governing our communities and our society. Inuit women are the links to the past and to the future; Inuit women are the vessels of culture, health, language, traditions, teaching, care giving, and child rearing. These qualities are fundamental to the survival of any society.[61]

To move forward on gender issues in the Canadian Arctic, policies and programs need to consider the adverse effects of colonialism and the residential school system on Inuit communities more broadly and the role of gender in Inuit society and the imbalance that exists in the relations between Inuit men and women more specifically. When addressing issues such as the environment, the economy and politics, both women's and men's connection to the Arctic ecosystem and their traditional ways of life and knowledge need to be integrated into the analysis.

A gender analysis of these areas reveals that although women play significant roles in Inuit society these roles are not visible in formal institutional structures. For men, the analysis highlights the difficulties of making a transition from traditional activities to the types of employment currently available. The issues for women and men related to health, domestic violence, and housing and homelessness require specific strategies and funding to help alleviate the overall risks and insecurities.

For Inuit women's organizations such as Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, moving forward on gender issues requires a three-pronged approach that encompasses strengthening the voice of Inuit women through gender mainstreaming, building health and safety infrastructure for Inuit communities, and providing satisfactory housing for all Inuit, male and female.

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